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Title: Youth Transitions, VET and the 'Making' of Class: A European Perspective

Key words: Youth transitions, VET, class

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework The European Union has seen the route to competitiveness as arising from the development of a pan-European knowledge economy. It is in this context that Vocational Education and Training (VET) has an important role to play. To that end a significant body of work has addressed the manner in which European VET systems develop in young people the competences, skills and dispositions required at work. Whilst competence has been a theme in English research concerned with youth transitions a greater emphasis has been directed towards processes of class reproduction. For example, early English studies of FE and the VET experiences of young people illustrated the way these created identities that served to reproduce class relations, albeit mediated by gender and race (Hollands, 1990). Bates (1991) explored the manner in which notions of femininity and domesticity cohered with reproductive processes, whilst Avis (1988) considered race and ethnicity. Much of this work explored the lived experiences of young people on training schemes or vocational programmes (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980) with little work directly addressing youth transitions and the "making" of classed subjects, in particular A-level students. Moos, (1979) discussed the way YTS prepared young people for casualised and intermittent waged labour and key to this understanding was learners' orientations to mental/manual labour. Early studies focused on underachievement and resistance to schooling which propelled young people towards unskilled work (but note, Avis, 1985). These studies suggested schooling was marginal to these young people's lives, for whom mental labour was abstract and divorced from the real world. Willis (1977) demonstrated the association of mental labour with effeminacy for boys, and Stafford (1991) illustrated the way trainees actively resisted practices reminiscent of schooling. For vocational students these orientations were reflected in the emphasis placed on waged labour (Avis, 1983). These studies illustrated the association of mental/manual divisions with the reproduction of class and gendered identities. Contemporary research has engaged with these arguments, the work of Högberg (2011) in Sweden and Niemi and Rosval's (2013) research in Finland and Sweden echo these processes illustrating the continued importance of the mental/manual divisions as well as their articulation with gender and class in youth transitions (and see Schneider and Tieben, 2011, work on German schooling). English FE research, utilising Bourdieu's notions of capital, field and habitus, considers the articulation of structure and agency and the salience of class in education (Colley, 2006). The ESRC's *Transforming Learning Cultures Project* (TLC) (James and Biesta, 2007) discusses formative processes in relation to learning cultures, but under-plays the political implications. With notable exceptions, TLC failed to develop a robust political economy of learners' experiences as a consequence of its case study orientation and focus on transforming learning and teaching cultures (but see Colley, 2006). Recently, following changes in the European labour market, the increased salience of neo-liberalism and precariousness of employment a number of writers have addressed the

articulation of VET with the formation of class relations. In Germany this current is reflected in the work of Schmit (2010) and Müller (2014).

Methods/methodology

The paper is located within European discussions of Knowledge Based Economies, competitiveness and changes in the youth labour market that impact upon youth transitions to waged employment. This is set within neo-liberalism and precariousness, which leads to insecure employment and 'broken transitions' (see Thelen and Busemeyer, 2011). Underdeveloped in VET/FE literature on youth transitions is the way learner dispositions are re-formed, breaking away from previous cultural moorings. Notions of 'othering', hierarchicalisation and differentiation are significant. Kehily and Pattman (2006) explore the way academic sixth-formers constitute themselves as middle-class *subjects-in-the-making* by pathologising working-class dropouts. Research on the psychological costs of educational engagement manifested in a sense of inadequacy similarly points towards the 'making of class'. Skeggs (2004) illustrates this in her study of working-class girls, with Walkerdine *et al* (2001) suggesting such processes also affect middle-class girls. These processes may become mapped onto divisions within and across educational institutions (Grubb, 2006) where learners 'choose' a particular course on the basis of their assumed capabilities. Such processes may articulated with institutionally shaped transitions and identities influenced by structures such as a selective school systems, highly institutionalised VET systems as in Germany (Schmidt, 2010), or structurally unequal, but notionally comprehensive system as in England.

Expected outcomes/results

The preceding raises questions about class formative processes in VET/FE. In addition questions are posed about youth transitions and the manner in which learners exercise agency, 'adopting' particular dispositions that tie them to specific class trajectories or enable them to break with previously cultural moorings. It is important to consider how helpful such analyses are in a socio-economic context where class is thought to be fractured and where there is increasing individualisation. This becomes even more important in a socio-economic context where transitions to waged labour have become problematic as a result of labour market changes (see Roberts, 2012). The emphasis upon competitiveness, framed within a neo-liberal context, similarly poses questions about the social justice implications of youth transitions to waged labour. Much of the preceding research emphasises learner agency. To what extent is this framed by class origins, mediated by gender and ethnicity? How are such processes influenced by the European and national contexts in which they are set? Do such analyses presume a particular conceptualisation of the social formation and allied social relations? Can we compare early analyses of VET/FE with contemporary theorisations, and do the former offer additional insights? The paper will explore these questions.

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